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Capital Tactic

Pentagon Arms Itself With Leaks

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WASHINGTON—During a breakfast session with reporters recently, Gen. W. L. Creech, commander of the Tactical Air Command, unexpectedly disclosed that the Soviet Union had developed three new fighter planes that might out-perform the best fighters currently in the U.S. arsenal.

The result was alarming headlines in newspapers—and success for the Air Force with a time-honored Washington ploy: the calculated leak.

Earlier, the Air Force had asked Congress for \$23 million in the fiscal 1983 budget to begin development of a new-generation fighter. Classified intelligence analyses of the new Soviet threat had been available to key members of Congress, but the request was in danger of falling victim to the pervasive budget-cutting mood on Capitol Hill.

Two weeks after Creech went public with the previously secret assessment of the new Soviet aircraft, however, Congress voted to let the Air Force go ahead with research and development for the new U.S. fighter.

More Common Practice

The incident illustrates a bureaucratic maneuver common enough in the past but becoming increasingly prevalent since the Reagan Administration took office: selective leaking of intelligence and other information to tilt decisions on important defense questions. It is a trend that some defense analysts fear may fritter away Pentagon credibility and help dissolve national support for building a stronger defense.

Under the best of circumstances, accurately assessing the threat posed by the Soviet Union or other potential adversaries and shaping the budget to meet such challenges always has been difficult. And the pressure from American military establishments always has been tremendous.

Indeed, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, according to the Soviet leader's memoirs, glumly acknowledged during informal talks at Camp David 23 years ago that neither was able to resist the demands of generals waving intelligence reports about what the other side was believed to be doing.

Inaccurate Leaks in 1950s

Nor is the calculating, budget-manipulating government official new on the scene.

In the 1950s, the jobs of 14,000 people in seven states and congressional appropriations of more than \$1 billion to develop an atomic-powered bomber were sustained in part by official leaks about Soviet construction of such a plane. Intelligence experts now agree, however, that the leaks were not true.

Ironically, as U.S. intelligence-gathering and analysis have become more sophisticated, the rational translation of threat assessment into budget reality has become more frantic.

Despite the Reagan Administration's commitment to a five-year, \$1.5-trillion increase in defense spending, blossoming budget deficit projections have convinced Pentagon planners that they had better get new weapons systems approved quickly, before congressional support for big defense budgets evaporates.

As the Air Force competes for scarce funds with the Navy and the Army, defense analysts say, leaks have become more profligate.

"In the old days there were few leaks, and there was always a guy from the FBI in my office the following morning trying to find the leaker," said retired Gen. Daniel O. Graham, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency. "Hell now it's gotten so rampant I don't think they bother with that anymore."

Compounding the problem for Congress and the public is the government's penchant for stamping nearly all intelligence analyses top secret. As a result, the editor of a respected military journal says, independent verification of leaks has become more difficult.

The Pentagon does offer classified briefings to members of Congress on such issues, but the sessions are not normally well attended. And the public has no access to such briefings, which could give better perspective to issues that have been the subject of selective leaks.

An Unbalanced Picture

And even experienced congressional staff members with security clearances say they are having increased difficulty prodding information out of the Pentagon. "You tend to go to your friends over there," one aide said. "The problem is that your friends tend to share your ideology, and sometimes I feel I'm not getting a balanced picture."

In the resultant cauldron of leaks and rumors, rational and calm independent thinking on defense often gets sideswiped. That is unfortunate any time, but it has become more perilous for two reasons:

First, the high technology involved in modern weapons systems has dramatically lengthened the time it takes to bring new weapons from concept through production

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